

# The Left's Iraq Muddle

Wall Street Journal Opinion

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May 22, 2007

At this year's graduation celebration at The New School in New York, Iranian lawyer, human-rights activist and Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi delivered our commencement address. This brave woman, who has been imprisoned for her criticism of the Iranian government, had many good and wise things to say to our graduates, which earned their applause.

But one applause line troubled me. Ms. Ebadi said: "democracy cannot be imposed with military force."

What troubled me about this statement -- a commonly heard criticism of U.S. involvement in Iraq -- is that those who say such things seem to forget the good U.S. arms have done in imposing democracy on countries like Japan and Germany, or Bosnia more recently.

Let me restate the case for this Iraq war from the U.S. point of view. The U.S. led an invasion to overthrow Saddam Hussein because Iraq was rightly seen as a threat following Sept. 11, 2001. For two decades we had suffered attacks by radical Islamic groups but were lulled into a false sense of complacency because all previous attacks were "over there." It was our nation and our people who had been identified by Osama bin Laden as the "head of the snake." But suddenly Middle Eastern radicals had demonstrated extraordinary capacity to reach our shores.

As for Saddam, he had refused to comply with numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions outlining specific requirements related to disclosure of his weapons programs. He could have complied with the Security Council resolutions with the greatest of ease. He chose not to because he was stealing and extorting billions of dollars from the U.N. Oil for Food program.

No matter how incompetent the Bush administration and no matter how poorly they chose their words to describe themselves and their political opponents, Iraq was a larger national security risk after Sept. 11 than it was before. And no matter how much we might want to turn the clock back and either avoid the invasion itself or the blunders that followed, we cannot. The war to overthrow Saddam Hussein is over. What remains is a war to overthrow the government of Iraq.

Some who have been critical of this effort from the beginning have consistently based their opposition on their preference for a dictator we can control or contain at a much lower cost. From the start they said the price tag for creating an environment where democracy could take root in Iraq would be high. Those critics can go to sleep at night knowing they were right.

The critics who bother me the most are those who ordinarily would not be on the side of supporting dictatorships, who are arguing today that only military intervention can prevent the genocide of Darfur, or who argued yesterday for military intervention in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda to ease the sectarian violence that was tearing those places apart.

Suppose we had not invaded Iraq and Hussein had been overthrown by Shiite and Kurdish insurgents. Suppose al Qaeda then undermined their new democracy and inflamed sectarian tensions to the same level of violence we are seeing today. Wouldn't you expect the same people who are urging a unilateral and immediate withdrawal to be urging military intervention to end this carnage? I would.

American liberals need to face these truths: The demand for self-government was and remains strong in Iraq despite all our mistakes and the violent efforts of al Qaeda, Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias to disrupt it. Al Qaeda in particular has targeted for abduction and murder those who are essential to a functioning democracy: school teachers, aid workers, private contractors working to rebuild Iraq's infrastructure, police officers and anyone who cooperates with the Iraqi government. Much of Iraq's middle class has fled the country in fear.

With these facts on the scales, what does your conscience tell you to do? If the answer is nothing, that it is not our responsibility or that this is all about oil, then no wonder today we Democrats are not trusted with the reins of power. American lawmakers who are watching public opinion tell them to move away from Iraq as quickly as possible should remember this: Concessions will not work with either al Qaeda or other foreign fighters who will not rest until they have killed or driven into exile the last remaining Iraqi who favors democracy.

The key question for Congress is whether or not Iraq has become the primary battleground against the same radical Islamists who declared war on the U.S. in the 1990s and who have carried out a series of terrorist operations including 9/11. The answer is emphatically, "yes."

This does not mean that Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11; he was not. Nor does it mean that the war to overthrow him was justified -- though I believe it was. It only means that a unilateral withdrawal from Iraq would hand Osama bin Laden a substantial psychological victory.

Those who argue that radical Islamic terrorism has arrived in Iraq because of the U.S.-led invasion are right. But they are right because radical Islam opposes democracy in Iraq. If our purpose had been to substitute a dictator who was more cooperative and supportive of the West, these groups wouldn't have lasted a week.

Finally, Jim Webb said something during his campaign for the Senate that should be emblazoned on the desks of all 535 members of Congress: You do not have to occupy a country in order to fight the terrorists who are inside it. Upon that truth I believe it is

possible to build what doesn't exist today in Washington: a bipartisan strategy to deal with the long-term threat of terrorism.

The American people will need that consensus regardless of when, and under what circumstances, we withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq. We must not allow terrorist sanctuaries to develop any place on earth. Whether these fighters are finding refuge in Syria, Iran, Pakistan or elsewhere, we cannot afford diplomatic or political excuses to prevent us from using military force to eliminate them.

***Mr. Kerrey, a former Democratic senator from Nebraska and member of the 9/11 Commission, is president of The New School.***